

*Learning foreign languages in Russia and the UK*



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# **Introduction**

“He who does not know foreign languages

does not know anything about his own.”

(Johann Goethe)

It isn’t a secret that we live in a multicultural world where people speak different languages. So, learning a foreign language is an essential part of educational process for the majority of people. There are a lot of different reasons why people choose to study a second language, for example, to find a good job, to communicate with people worldwide, to travel abroad, to get more intelligent and educated. As for me it is a key to making my work and my life in general more interesting and exciting.

Moreover, the overall approach to the problem of studying language differs from country to country. The proportion of people studying foreign languages, the educational system of the country and the range of languages studied depend on various factors, including historical, geopolitical, economic and mental.

In this project, I would like to look into similarities and differences between Russia and the UK connected with the issue. I will be looking back at what foreign languages were studied at the countries and why, analyzing data on how many currently people study second languages, comparing approaches to teaching foreign languages, listing positive trends that can be noticed and making some predictions about the future of foreign language learning in the two countries.

# **Foreign languages in the past**

It’s general knowledge that English is the most useful language to learn in the world at the moment. If one speaks English, it is enough to travel and even work in the majority of the countries. However, historically that was not always the case. I’d like to start with going a few centuries back and taking a look at what studying foreign languages looked like before.

For a long time French was the preferred second language in Russia, not for everybody though. The majority of the population did not speak French, the ability of speaking a foreign language was highly valued in upper social circle and was considered to be a sign of intelligence. So, only wealthy people at the top of the social ladder learnt French. They were usually taught French in childhood, by the native French speakers and spoke really well. It was very common to hear Russian people communicate with each other in French at a social event, such as balls.

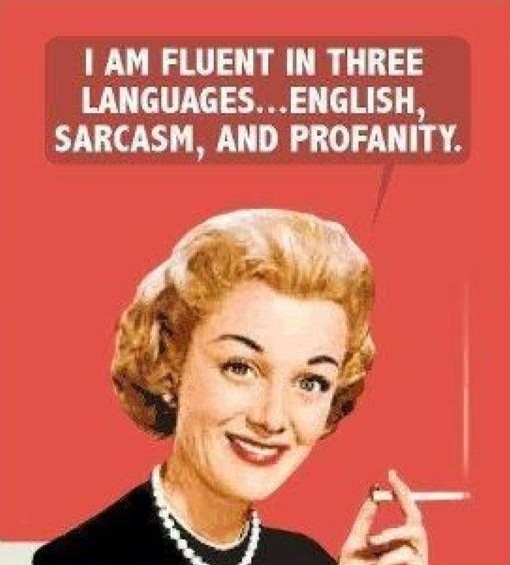
So why French? It had to do with the fact that in the 18th century France advanced in practically every field: fashion, etiquette, literature, social life, theatre, education. So French trendiness quickly became very popular not only in Russia but all around Europe. The obsession with French became so serious that sometimes parents worried more about teaching their child French rather than Russian.

The French appeared in English history much earlier and played a very significant role in the history of England and even the English language itself. It all started almost a thousand years ago with the Norman Conquest of 1066, which led to occupation of England by an army of Normans and French. A number of governmental and social changes were announced afterwards. One of these changes was the introduction of Norman French as the language of the noble elite, the court and government on the British Isles. It had stayed so for the next 400 years until King Henry V put a stop to French expansion when he went to war with France in 1415. However, because the two languages existed in parallel for so long, bits of French language stuck in England: the French language still features in much of our legal system and, until 1858, was the only one on British passports. Furthermore, the English language is full of words of French origin — almost half of them can be traced back to French roots.

Is French still the most common foreign language to study in either of the two countries? Not at all. Let’s move on to the next section to see what foreign languages have replaced French in the modern world.

# **Foreign languages in the present Russia and the UK**

The expansion of the French language ended quite a long time ago, a number of other foreign languages have appeared at the stage and have been gaining a lot of popularity. In this section I will be viewing statistics, which will provide a good understanding of not only what kind of languages are the most studied but also will give an overview of the language studying in both countries.

Brits are famous for not speaking foreign languages. According to a survey published by the European Commission, this bad reputation is totally justified. The results of the survey state that the British are officially the worst language learners in Europe. Russian people aren’t considered to be brilliant at studying second languages either. The research of EF EPI on the level of English around the world shows that Russia is only on the 34-th position among others 72 countries.

The statistics below proves that the situation in both countries is far from ideal:

* 62% of people surveyed can’t speak any other language apart from English
* 38% of Britons speak at least one foreign language
* 18% speak two languages
* only 6% of the population speak three or more languages.

The situation is even worse in Russia:

* 70% of people can’t speak any foreign language
* 17% of Russian can poorly speak one foreign language
* and approximately 3% can speak two or more languages

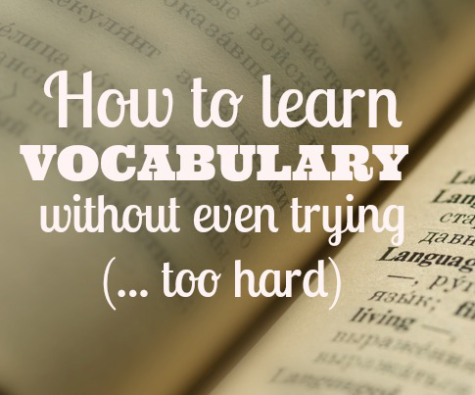
As we can see, more than a half of British people are monolingual. The situation is even worse in Russia, where more than two thirds of people experience this problem. Almost three times more Brits speak at least one foreign language than Russians do. And a similar proportion of less than one fifth of the population in both countries speak two foreign languages.

This allows us to conclude that the situation in both countries is disappointing. However, while the situation seems to be similarly frustrating, the negative effect that this problem brings to the two countries cannot be considered equal. English is the international language and thus it’s the most widely spoken foreign language in the world not only in politics, scientific field but also in everyday life.

According to job search website Superjob, almost 80% of well-paid jobs in Russia require knowledge of a foreign language. English is preferred in 96% of job vacancies, German is mentioned in 59% of vacancies, while French and Italian are requested in 14% and 11%, respectively. Chinese and Spanish are required in no more than 5% of job openings.

It’s obvious that, being native speakers of English, British people don’t face the problem of learning the “lingua franca” of the modern world. From the very beginning of their lives they already possess the ability of being able to communicate with people from other parts of the world. As a result, they are less motivated to study a foreign language than people whose mother language isn’t English.

As for Russia, one of the major reasons why Russians are so bad at studying languages is the fact that Russian language is so different to English (and any other European language), that it’s simply more challenging to learn it. Likewise, it’s incredibly difficult for English speakers to learn a Russian language.

But are there any similar reasons for such poor knowledge of foreign languages in Russia and the UK? Let’s pass on to the educational systems of the counties and see if the core of the problem for both countries lays there.

# **Educational system**

Britain

Learning a foreign language is not a popular option at school in Britain. In UK schools, it is common for children to start studying a foreign language at the age of 11 and many students give up languages completely at 14. So why don’t young people continue with languages at school? Research suggests that students think that it is more difficult to get good grades in languages than in other subjects such as science or history.

English students receive a relatively low amount of hours of foreign language education – only 216 compulsory hours, compared to 790 in Spain. Even more damningly, the lessons generally start too late, at age eleven, when the brain is past the prime language-acquisition stage. With no compulsory foreign-language education at a GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) level, less than half of all students continue to learn languages, with the percentage dropping as low as 5% at A-level.

The British government is now looking at different ways to improve language learning at school. Since 2014 it has been compulsory for [primary school](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primary_school) children to be taught at least one language. Another idea is to start much younger; there are plans to introduce foreign languages from the age of 5. They also think about giving school children more choice. The languages traditionally studied in British schools have been French, Spanish and German. Now the government is encouraging teachers to expand the range of languages taught to include Arabic, Mandarin and Urdu.

Russia

Some years ago, in most of Russian schools the subject “foreign language” appeared in the time-table beginning from the 5th grade, and sometimes from the 2nd. Some schools even offer two or more foreign languages. In this case, children usually take English language in the 2nd grade, and then in the 5th grade they can start German or French.

According to the Russian Ministry of Science and Education, foreign languages have been a mandatory subject starting in second grade (seven and eight year-olds) since 2011. However, each educational institution independently chooses the number of hours dedicated to foreign language study and quite often this number is very low. Schools also have the option of introducing a second foreign language starting in 5th grade, but only schools specializing in foreign language study choose to do so. Such schools can also offer Asian languages such as Chinese and Japanese or others such as Polish, Turkish, Hebrew, Spanish and Italian.

In Russia studying a foreign language will become a compulsory subject included in USE (Unified State Exam) in 2020. Consequently, getting the secondary school diploma will be impossible without taking a foreign languages exam. Apart from the languages currently available for taking as an exam (English, German, French and Spanish), two more languages are expected to be included: Chinese and Italian.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Specifics** | **The UK** | **Russia** |
| Starting age | 11 years old | 7/8 years old |
| Hours of studying | 216[[1]](#footnote-1) | ~ 860 |
| Exam | Optional | Compulsory since 2020 |
| Compulsory studying | Only in primary school | Primary and secondary school |

*Table 1. Studying foreign languages in the UK and Russia. School specifics.*

# **Positive trends**

The previous section shows us that both governments do not intend to stay inactive. As well as that, there are positive trends in the attitude to language learning among populations of both countries. Both British and Russian people realize that due to the rise of [technology](https://www.capitatranslationinterpreting.com/go-global-mobile-app/), the world is becoming smaller; it is easier than ever to communicate with someone on the other side of the globe. Therefore, it is vital that [expanding businesses](https://www.capitatranslationinterpreting.com/doing-business-in/) reach out to these foreign markets. One of the best ways of doing this is knowledge of a shared language.

Russia

Last year, the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VCIOM) published the results of a poll about foreign languages. It asked Russians which languages should be studied in school, whether or not children will find foreign languages useful in everyday life, and which benefits can be gained from knowing foreign languages. One thousand six hundred Russian residents from 130 towns and cities answered the poll, which was the first of its kind run by VCIOM.

The poll indicated that the vast majority of respondents (92%) think children should study foreign languages in school. Unsurprisingly, that statistics were the highest in Russia’s biggest cities – Moscow and St. Petersburg rising to the high of 98%. Nearly three-quarters of Russians (74%) are convinced that their children and grandchildren will benefit from knowing other languages. And no more than 5% of respondents in each category disagreed that future generations would stand to benefit from knowledge of foreign languages.

VCIOM’s Director for International Research Olga Kamenchuk said foreign languages are always among the most important subjects that parents mention to sociologists about their children’s education. “Today, more and more Russians are realizing the importance of studying foreign languages.

Among the perks of knowing foreign languages, respondents noted the ability to communicate with foreigners, the convenience of traveling abroad, the ability to read books and films in their original language, and wider opportunities for study. One-fifth of respondents said knowledge of a foreign language offers better chances of getting a high-paying and prestigious job.

Britain

More and more multinational employers around the world are interested in candidates with knowledge of more than one foreign language. The rapidly developing business world is greedy for employees who would be as qualified as possible. In a modern, globalised world with complex international business relationships, it is not good enough to only be able to communicate in English, you need to speak the language of the country you deal with.

Consequently, despite the advantage of being a native speaker the international language, the British people don’t think that this is an excuse to stay monolingual. They realise that there are clear economic risks if they are not able to change their attitude towards language learning simply because at least because more than 70% of the world’s population does not speak English! Many of the most rapidly emerging economies of the world such as China, Brazil and countries in the Middle East have very large populations who do not speak English, but are keen to trade internationally.

Besides that, British people understand that being monolingual also carries cultural risks. Speaking another language provides a window to a different culture and its customs. Skill in another language helps to communicate with other human beings, and increases access to knowledge through research or literature published in another language.

# **Common foreign language of the future**

The leadership of the US and the UK established in the 20th century is coming to an end. A number of rapidly developing countries are appearing at the international arena gaining more and more control. The country, which is definitely on the rise, is China. Having the fastest-growing economy across the globe China is about to replace USA as the world's greatest economy. Besides, Mandarin is the language spoken by the biggest number of people in the world. Although not traditionally an easy language to master, the Chinese Ministry of Education indicates that over 40 million people outside China are currently learning Mandarin and that the number is growing annually. There isn’t a single country that could ignore these facts, Russia and the UK are not exceptions. Mandarin is predicted to become one of the three most popular foreign languages learned in British and Russian schools.

Modern parents consider the current demographic trends and want their children to have advantage at the workplaces of the future. Studying Mandarin is also becoming increasingly popular among Russian students. According to the government data, at least 5,000 students in Russia currently take Mandarin as part of their high school programme.

Following Russia's “turn to the East”, the country's government has supported a growing interest in Mandarin. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has said knowledge of the Chinese language opens gates for new career and life opportunities for Russians. In Moscow, 14 schools offer Chinese language classes and there are dozens of such schools in Russia's Far East. The Russian government also decided to add Mandarin as an optional foreign language in Russia's USE along with English, French, Spanish and German.

"We have six different fields. Eastern Studies is one of them where they study eastern languages and Mandarin classes are the biggest,” said Mr Andrei Belov, the deputy principal of Lyceum of the Higher School of Economics in Moscow.

The UK does not fall behind the fashion to study Mandarin. In Britain reports actually indicate a wider interest in the Chinese language, with a 40% increase in students sitting the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exam in Mandarin Chinese since 2002. In 2012, the total number of students sitting the exam grew by 7% compared to the previous year.

Brighton College has become the first independent school to make Mandarin a compulsory foreign language. Its headmaster Richard Cairns said, 'One of my key tasks is to make sure pupils are equipped for the realities of the 21st century. One of those realities is that China has the fastest-growing economy in the world.'

The first school in Europe to teach all its students in both English and [Chinese](http://www.independent.co.uk/topic/China) is to open in London next year. Founders of Kensington Wade, a dual language independent prep school, say children as young as one will be taught in Chinese, and all those who attend the school will leave fluent. Professor Hugo de Burgh, who founded the school said: “Learning Chinese opened another world to me, enriching my life and giving me opportunities I would never otherwise have had. Now I want the next generation to have the same, only earlier.”

# **Conclusion**

Russia and the UK originally were in very different conditions in terms of learning of foreign languages, with British people speaking the international language as their native. It would be unreasonable to expect the two countries to show the same trends in foreign languages learning. However, there are overlaps between the two countries. First of all, both countries started their interest in studying foreign languages from French, although the reasons for that were different: political for England and cultural for Russia. Secondly, the proportion of people learning languages is rather insignificant in both countries, which shows that there is a number of problems existing in both countries. Thirdly, governments and people of the two states are determined to improve the situation in the nearest future realising the importance of language skills in various fields. Finally, both countries are likely to direct their attention to studying Mandarin in the nearest future due to the rapidly growing influence of this Asian state on the international market and political arena.

In the meantime, there are noticeable differences in the approach to teaching foreign languages at schools, for example, the number of compulsory hours and the duration of studying vary a lot. Furthermore, there is a considerable gap between the general attitude to studying foreign languages. For Russian people it is no longer enough to know just one foreign language (mainly English) and they aim at mastering two foreign languages. While the primary goal for Britain is encouraging more people to learn at least one foreign language.

To sum up, Russia and the UK present a good example of how learning foreign languages is a pressing issue for countries which are fundamentally different historically, economically, geographically. I personally will be looking forward to seeing the situation improve in both of the great countries.

# **List of references links**

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1. Could be more if one chooses to continue learning foreign language is secondary school. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)